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Issue #4 - Does the Bible's Silence Justify Abortion?

Answering the Theological Case for Abortion - Part I

By Scott Klusendorf

Abortion advocates with The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and Planned Parenthood Federation of America contend that the Bible is silent on abortion and that none of the Scriptures traditionally cited by pro-life advocates establishes the humanity of the unborn. “One thing the Bible does not say is ‘Thou shalt not abort,’” writes Roy Bowen Ward, Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion at Miami University of Ohio.¹ His advice to pro-life Jews and Christians is simple: Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where it is silent.

Reverend Mark Bigelow, Member of Planned Parenthood’s Clergy Advisory Board, writes, “Even as a minister I am careful what I presume Jesus would do if he were alive today, but one thing I know from the Bible is that Jesus was not against women having a choice in continuing a pregnancy. He never said a word about abortion (nor did anyone else in the Bible) even though abortion was available and in use in his time.”² Paul D. Simmons, former Professor of Christian Ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, finds the Bible’s silence on abortion “profound” and remarks that not once does the subject appear in the Apostle Paul’s lists of prohibited actions.³ We can sum up the thinking of all three men this way: If the Bible doesn’t condemn abortion, pro-life

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advocates shouldn't either. We should trust each woman to decide the issue according to *her* own personal faith.

Suppose we grant that Ward, Bigelow, and Simmons are correct: Scripture is silent on abortion. Let's further suppose that none of the specific passages cited by pro-life advocates (Psalm 51:5; 139:13-15; Luke 1:41-44 to name a few) demonstrates conclusively that the unborn are human. What follows? Are we to conclude from the alleged silence of Scripture that women have a God-given right to abort?

Does Silence Equal Permission?

Abortion advocates are correct that the Bible does not specifically mention abortion, but what's the best explanation for its silence?

The hidden (and undefended) premise in the argument advanced by Ward, Bigelow, and Simmons is that whatever the Bible doesn't condemn it condones. It's easy to see why this premise is flawed. The Bible does not expressly condemn many things including racial discrimination against blacks, killing abortion doctors for fun, and lynching homosexuals, yet few people proclaim these acts morally justified. To the contrary, we know they are wrong by inference. For example, Scripture tells us it's wrong to treat

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human beings unjustly. Lynching homosexuals treats human beings unjustly. Therefore, we know that Scripture condemns this activity even if the topic of lynching is never addressed.

What's the Real Issue?

A century ago racists argued from the alleged silence of Scripture that blacks were not human. Some went so far as to deny that black people had souls.⁴ Again, this was hardly persuasive. While Scripture does not mention every specific race and nationality, it does teach that all humans are made in God's image and were created to have fellowship with Him (Genesis 1:26; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:10-11). The inference is clear. If blacks are human beings, they are made in God's image, too. No further proof from Scripture is necessary.

The same is true with the unborn. If embryos and fetuses are human beings, commands that forbid the unjust taking of human life apply to them as they do other humans. Appealing to the Bible's alleged silence on abortion misses the point entirely. Moreover, the argument from silence put forth by Ward, Bigelow, and Simmons proves too much. The Bible does not mention one of the most heinous practices of the ancient pagan world, female infanticide. Does it follow the act is morally justified?

Here's how to clarify things. When abortion advocates argue their

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case from the silence of Scripture, simply ask, "Are you saying that whenever the Bible does not specifically condemn something, it condones it?" When they say "no" (and they must), reply, "Then what is your point?"⁵

A Better Explanation

There are good reasons to suppose the alleged silence of Scripture does not mean the biblical writers condoned abortion, but that prohibitions against it were largely unnecessary. We should remember that the Bible as a whole is not a comprehensive code of ethics, but the story of God's redemption of His people. That is, the biblical writers, under guidance from the Holy Spirit, selectively discuss subjects relevant to their intended audiences while leaving many other topics unstated. Bottom line: If the Hebrews of the Old Testament and the Christians of the New were not inclined to abort their unborn offspring, there's little reason for Scripture to address the matter. Looked at objectively, the biblical and cultural evidence suggests they were not inclined to consider abortion even though it was practiced in the surrounding cultures.

Turning first to the Hebrew worldview of the Old Testament, we find that:

Humans have intrinsic value in virtue of the kind of thing they

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are -- creatures made in the image of God. Hence, the shedding of innocent blood is strictly forbidden (Gen. 1:26, 9:6, Ex. 23:7, Prov. 6:16-17).

Children were seldom seen as unwanted or as a nuisance (unless they turn wicked), but as a gift from God -- the highest possible blessing (Psalms 127:3-5, 113:9, Gen. 17:6, 33:5).

Immortality was expressed through one's descendants. God promises Abraham to make of him a great nation and that promise is passed on to Isaac, Jacob, etc. "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from Him," writes the Psalmist (127:3. See also Gen. 48:16). Indeed, the very hope of the nation was tied to the belief that the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would multiply and flourish. "To perpetuate not only the nation but one's own individual family line was thus a sacred responsibility, requiring special customs and laws to safeguard it," writes biblical scholar N.T. Wright. "Continuance of the family line was not simply a matter of keeping a family name alive. It was part of the way in which God's promises, for Israel and perhaps even the whole world, would be fulfilled."⁶

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that sterility and barrenness were a curse, a source of great shame and sorrow. Hence, Peninnah's harsh ridicule of Hannah, the Prophet Samuel's mother, because of the latter's initial barrenness (1 Samuel 1:6. See also Gen. 20:17-18, 30:1, 22-23). Likewise, to see one's own offspring suffer premature death was perhaps the greatest parental disaster imaginable.

Germain Grisez sums things up nicely: Among a Hebrew people

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who saw children as a gift and barrenness as a curse, it was virtually unthinkable that any woman from that culture would desire an abortion.⁷ Hence, the Old Testament's silence on abortion suggests that prohibitions against it were largely unnecessary, not that the practice was tacitly approved.

1. Roy Bowen Ward, "Is the Fetus a Person?" *Mission Journal* (January 1986). Article is posted by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice at www.rcrc.org
2. Mark Bigelow, Letter to Bill O' Reilly of Fox News, November 22, 2002.
3. Paul D. Simmons, "Personhood, the Bible, and the Abortion Debate," article published by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice at www.rcrc.org/religion/es3/comp.html
4. Josiah Priest, *Bible Defense of Slavery: Origin, Fortunes and History of the Negro Race*, 5th ed. (Glasgow, Ky: W.S. Brown, 1852) p. 33.
5. I'm indebted to Greg Koukl for this excellent question. See his "Tactics in Defending the Faith" series at www.str.org.
6. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) pp. 99-100.

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7. Germain Grisez, *Abortion: the Myths, the Realities, and the Arguments* (New York: Corpus Books, 1970) pp. 123-127.

